

The Fall 848

Chapter 848: In the Flesh

There she stood, as beautiful as he remembered. That alluring smile, those intoxicating curves, those limpid eyes that seemed to both invite you in and warn you off – toxic perfection. Alea was so lifelike, and one memory after another was dragged from the depths of his mind. But the next moment she shifted, her horns disappearing as her silk robes were replaced by the hardy linens that would hold up in the fields.

His most trusted subordinate had become a hazy simile of Uynala, her features not nearly as detailed. One face after another a familiar figure appeared before him. Friends, lovers, even enemies. The Atwood siblings, full of mindboggling luck and layers of secrets. His stern but doting grandfather. It was a real walk through memory lane.

“I really need to get out of here,” Ogras eventually sighed, and with a wave of his hand, the illusion disappeared. “Or I’ll soon go mad.”

“How would you know if you haven’t?” a voice snickered in his head. “I’ve seen it so many times before. That hazy state where perception starts to shift, where old truths become muddled and new ones take their place. Where the discrepancy between one’s inner and outer world slowly drives a wedge in your personality, splitting it into two incompletes.”

“Are you done?” Ogras asked with a roll of his eyes.

“If conjuring past friends and lovers to accompany you with the help of your new Dao Branch isn’t crazy, then what about the lost hours?” K’Rav gleefully asked.

“It’ll sort itself out,” Ogras shrugged with disinterest as he walked over to the tree. “They are getting spaced out further and further apart, meaning they will be gone soon enough.”

Ogras said that, but he, unfortunately, wasn’t as confident as he let on. After spending a mind-bending year in the depths of that icy domain, he knew his grasp of reality had slipped a bit. Who could possibly be fine after having their memories wiped almost a hundred times?

Even more troubling was that the gaps in his memory kept appearing even after absorbing that weird treasure, but this time without any helpful notes hastily scribbled down. He thought he had refined all of the icy crystal to form his Branch of False Truths, his illusory Dao Branch based on his vision in the Tower of Eternity and spending so much time living at the edge between falsehoods and truths.

“If you say so,” K’Rav snickered, his presence thankfully returning into the flag.

Ogras once more swore at the fact the flag couldn’t be placed in a spatial tool, what with the technically-living souls inside. Then again, he wasn’t sure he’d dare place it inside one in either case, out of fear the shifty warlock would find some way to take his flag and run. So he could only endure the goblin’s attempts to foster Heart Demons, or at least annoy him to death.

Thankfully, life wasn’t all bad, and he looked up with anticipation at the fruit whose color was rapidly growing deeper. An enticing aroma was already spreading through the area, and desirous calls could be

heard in every direction. However, not one of the beasts dared to come closer as the treasure matured, the rotting carcasses strewn across the area a poignant reminder of what would happen if they did.

This was the fifth one, and most likely the last. Ogras didn't mind, seeing as he had almost gained immunity to them by now. In other words, it was about time to move on from this forest. Though where, he didn't quite know. He had found the Ra'Lashar Kingdom by chance when following his guts, and from there had passed through one biome after another, each one a realm fragment the Dimensional Seed had swallowed.

The Mystic Realm was a lot bigger than Ogras had expected, but he was finally running out of places to visit. To the south of the forest was the edge of the realm; a weak film that could move thousands of meters in an instant, throwing any poor bastard who had strayed too far into the void. To the west was the glacier and the other regions he had already visited, and to the east were the badlands. That left north, where the simple giant presumably still played court.

The question was whether he should enter the badlands, risking running into swarms of those battle-crazed bipods. He had encountered dozens of strays, or perhaps scouts, over the past years, and they had kept getting stronger just as he had. Their bloodlines were clearly out of the norm, which was extremely odd considering how many of them there seemed to be.

Normally, when individual beasts were this powerful, there wouldn't be too many of them, what with the law of balance, and all.

Thankfully, most of them seemed reluctant to leave the badlands, which Ogras estimated taking up nearly a third of the Mystic Realm, and Ogras wasn't sure poking that nest was worth it. He had seen those voracious bastards chew straight through both Spiritual Ice and hardened rocks like it was nothing.

With years having passed by now, there couldn't possibly be much of value remaining in the badlands, unless it were some sort of treasure they weren't interested in. That thought alone made Ogras grimace. It wasn't the thought of losing out on treasures, though that certainly pained him as well.

Gods, it had already been ten years. A whole decade stuck in this netherblasted realm.

A snap dragged him out of his thoughts, and Ogras quickly snatched the fruit as it fell from its branch, immediately swallowing it before it had time to begin its rapid decay.

"Time to work, you bastards," Ogras muttered as he infused some energy into the [Shadewar Flag], and dozens of guardian ghosts appeared around him as Ogras sat down and closed his eyes.

Minutes turned to hours, and hours turned to days as Ogras gradually channeled the seemingly inexhaustible energies contained in the fruit into the node in his head, all while channeling his Cultivation Manual. Finally, he felt a pop, followed by a blazing headache that almost made him keel over.

A few of the ghosts immediately stirred, but a couple of quick jabs instilled with the Branch of the Grey World ended the insurrection as quickly as it began. Ogras had the technique to control the ghosts, but would take decades, centuries perhaps, to perfectly brand all the captives in the inner world of his unorthodox Spirit Tool.

Of course, having a resentful ghost as a Tool Spirit didn't help. Luckily, it was mostly fine as long as there were some enemies around to turn their aggression toward, and it was only when forced to stand around like this they started to get antsy.

Having opened seven nodes in just under two months was huge, and it had put him right at the precipice of Peak E-grade. Just two more levels and he'd be there. A glance at his status screen confirmed what he had been hoping for as well; the latest level had pushed his Dexterity past 10,000, which really had rewarded him with a title as he'd hoped.

[Specialist: Reach 10,000 points in a single attribute before evolving to D-Grade. Reward: Dexterity +5%.]

Having wheedled information out of Zac for years, Ogras already knew he'd gotten a title for pushing one of his attributes 1,000 while still in F-grade. Thankfully, a version of the same title appeared in the E-grade as well, though no doubt watered-down. Then again, he had nothing to complain about.

Before he left for Earth, he couldn't have imagined reaching his current heights in just over a decade. Two Dao Branches, a mutated race that was conducive to his path, a unique Body-Tempering Technique that had almost increased his, admittedly unimpressive, attribute efficiency by half. And that was only the things you'd see on a status screen.

Apart from that, there was the simple fact of having formed a working path while still in the E-grade, having his affinities boosted by a considerable degree thanks to this unparalleled environment. Who knew that a baby Mystic Realm was this amazing, probably surpassing the cultivation environment even of the peak factions in Zecia? He just needed to find a replacement for the [Grey World Mudra], and he was golden.

He had been quite proud of the manual back home, as his grandpa had gone through some trouble to acquire it. But back then both his vantage and ambitions were a lot more restrained compared to today, and he feared it wouldn't be good enough to form the kind of core he wanted.

Such was the curse of having an unimpressive start – every step forward would be uphill until you managed to right the ship.

"Well, better late than never," Ogras smiled as he turned toward the tree.

If it was back home, the elders would have covered the tree in a series of arrays to speed up its recuperation process. That way, it'd provide its next batch of fruits much quicker. Here, there was no need for that. Having absconded with most of the wealth in this realm already, Ogras had no plans of ever returning.

So why respect the law of conservation in this place? What was it to him if some bastard in the future didn't find anything worthwhile when visiting this forest?

His spear appeared in his hand, and Ogras punched a deep hole with a simple jab that just reached the heart of the trunk. A moment later, an amber sap started to pour out from the wound, the sticky compound veritably teeming with energy. Ogras wasn't too sure he'd be able to use this goop on himself, but it should fetch a pretty penny on the outside considering how energy-dense it was.

Another hour passed as Ogras siphoned out the lifeblood of the tree while it withered with a speed visible to the naked eye. However, a deep thud made him look around with alarm, but he quickly

realized it wasn't some big beast coming to stake a claim on the tree. The sound rather came from the sky – where space itself had been indented.

It almost looked like a window with a spiderweb of cracks, but those cracks were rapidly mending. The next moment, a second thud echoed through the world to worsen the spatial damage again, but there wasn't a third. Five minutes later, the sky had completely recovered, but Ogras' gaze didn't turn away as he thoughtfully took a swig of his almost depleted stock of liquor.

Was it finally time?

Finally, his eyes shifted away from the sky before turning to the east. One last hurrah before it was time to say goodbye?

It really was her.

However, Zac soon realized it was not literally Alea in the flesh, considering the demoness was partly translucent as she stood behind him with her familiar smile. Her appearance was also a lot more like the large avatar of [Death's Embrace] than her old self, with the reddish tint of Torrid Demons having been replaced by pristine white with black scale-like markings.

It was a bit like Ogras' odd transformation, but the aura was completely different. While Ogras' constitution felt indistinct like he was made out of shadows, the patterns on Alea's skin rather contained the whispers of death. Her horns were quite different as well, almost looking like crescent blades with the outer side of them sharpened into an actual edge.

But the most palpable transformation were her eyes, who looked more like the eyes of a Draugr than those of a demon, though she did have a sclera with a slight turquoise tint. It was just that her pupils were much bigger than before, making her eyes almost look entirely black. But even with all the changes, it really was her.

"You're finally back," Zac said with a hoarse voice, his heart assaulted by a wave of complex emotions.

"Well, in a sense," Alea smiled as she glanced at the coffin next to Zac. "Did you miss me?"

Even if her appearance was different, the smile was the same. For a moment, Zac was teleported back to the earliest days of the Incursion, just after he had dealt with Rydel and the Azh'Rezak incursion. Back then, there had been no Port Atwood, only Zac and his camper with the occasional visits from Alea or Ogras.

The situation had been pretty desperate back then, but it had also been simple. He had spent most of his days in the mines, slowly detoxifying his body from the Cosmic Water while Ogras helped set the foundations for his budding empire. Back then, he only had one goal – to find his family, and he was steadily working toward it.

Now, his power far surpassed what he could ever have imagined, but his life had grown so complicated. There were dozens of matters requiring his attention, threats looming in every direction. So much history weighing on his shoulders, so many goals that remained far out of reach.

"I did," Zac eventually said as he forced a smile. "It's really good to see you back in one piece. How is your soul?"

"My soul is healed and has completed its transformation," Alea said as she curiously looked around the courtyard. "Unfortunately, this form is not a natural state for me any longer, I'm not like that weird guy at the Dao Repository. I can't stay like this for long – it's exhausting. Perhaps I'll be able to move more freely by the time I reach whatever stage Brazla's at."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Zac urgently asked.

"Well, you can keep me fed and happy," Alea laughed. "You should have figured out what kind of materials I'll require going forward."

"No problem," Zac nodded. "And don't worry. I'll figure out a way to return your soul into a body, one way or another."

"Don't worry so much or you'll turn into an old man," Alea smiled as she floated over to Zac's side.

She tried to touch his cheek, but her hand passed right through, and Alea looked as disappointed as Zac felt. There was still a long way to go. However, Alea quickly regained her smile as she took a step back.

"I'm in no hurry. With my soul fused with this weapon, I might even outlive you. Besides, between my environment and you feeding me all these treasures, I'm making better progress on my cultivation than I ever have before."

"Still," Zac muttered.

"More importantly, put me on," Alea eagerly said as her eyes widened in anticipation. "I have a surprise for you."

It was a bit odd to hear the term 'put me on' from Alea, but he still did as he was told. He walked over and placed his hand on the cold surface of the coffin, and its chains smoothly wound around him and placed the Spirit Tool on its position on his back. It was more than five times heavier than before, even if it still only was the size of a large backpack.

"Now, send the command," Alea grinned, and Zac felt a stream of information enter his mind.

"What the—" Zac blurted, but his eyes lit up as he sent a stream of Branch of the War Axe into the coffin.

The next moment, a muffled rattle was followed by a weapon appearing in his hand – a pitch-black axe. At the end of its hilt, a chain was attached, connecting the weapon with the bottom of the coffin. The axe itself was actually quite familiar – its design almost an exact copy of the axe his Dao Apparition wielded.

It was roughly the same size as [Verun's Bite]; somewhat oversized for a one-handed axe with a forty-five centimeter crescent edge, eclipsing Verun's by five centimeters. On the back of the edge, a big spike acted as a counterweight, mirroring the smaller teeth on his primal-series axe.

However, there were a few differences to his Dao Avatar's weapon. For one, this one wasn't wrapped in chains. Instead, its hilt was made from some slightly mottled metal that felt extremely sturdy. On the

back of the haft there was also a familiar set of runes – identical to the ones that had appeared on the coffin lid.

The horizontal line ran along the full length of the haft, while the three horizontal scripts became his grip. The temper line of the edge was also quite interesting, almost perfectly matching the carvings on the coffin itself. Curious, Zac swung the weapon a few times, and he felt the balance was simply perfect even if its length and edge differed slightly from [Verun's Bite].

"Very dashing. I suit you quite nicely," Alea laughed. "Do you like it?"

"It's perfect, but how did you do this?" Zac asked. "I've never heard of a Spirit Tool changing this much from an evolution."

"It's a bit hard to explain, but that array you used on me is still around. Even now, its potential isn't exhausted. I should be able to transform upon reaching D-grade as well, but that will probably exhaust the energy in the array. After that, you'd have to find me a blacksmith," Alea shrugged as she floated around Zac.

"I love it, but don't overdo it with these transformations," Zac urged. "What if you damage or accidentally alter your soul? Remember, the goal is to bring you back."

"Yes, yes," Alea said with a roll of her eyes. "But until then I want to be able to help you out. What if I become too weak, and I have to spend millennia in your Spatial Rings because you're afraid I'll break in battle. Then I might really go crazy."

"Alright, is there anything else I can do?"

"You sure?" Alea asked as she leaned closer.

"Uh, yes?" Zac said.

"Alright," Alea said after some thought. "Don't date anyone else then."

"What?!" Zac blurted, thinking she was about to ask for some expensive material.

"I'm just joking. Why would I need to be jealous of some woman? Like I don't know you're closer to your weapons than you will be any woman," Alea laughed. "Do what you want. Someone as powerful as you ought to have a handful of wives and a few dozen children, really. Now, I need to go."

"Go? Already?" Zac asked with reluctance.

"Like I said, I can't stay in this form for long. I've already overstayed my welcome. I will be slightly weakened for the next few weeks, and you won't be able to use my new skill," Alea sighed.

"If I evolve you to Middle E-grade, will you be able to come out again?" Zac asked.

"Middle E-grade?" Alea laughed. "Silly boy, I'm already Late E-grade. Work hard, or I'll pass you by."

The next moment, she was gone.